

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A1

THE WASHINGTON POST
21 May 1981

Mercenaries Sent to Laos Seeking MIAs

STAT

By George C. Wilson and Art Harris
Washington Post Staff Writers

The United States financed and helped train a secret force of mercenaries who went into Laos earlier this month to determine if Americans were imprisoned in a jungle camp there, as covert overflights by satellites and spy planes had suggested.

The reconnaissance force returned a few days ago without any evidence that Americans were in the camp, chilling the hopes that the earlier photographic intelligence had raised in the minds of some Pentagon officials.

The team of Asians, believed to be Laotians, had been issued cameras to take pictures of the camp's inhabitants to supplement the overhead photography collected by the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency, sources said.

The sources added that photo interpreters scrutinized all the photography last weekend and concluded that there were no Americans in the jungle camp.

Asked about the mission, Col. Ronald A. Duchin, chief of the Pentagon news branch, said last night, "We do not comment on any special operations of this kind."

In another statement personally approved by Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, the Pentagon said the following when queried by The Washington Post about efforts to rescue any Americans still being held captive in Southeast Asia:

"There has been a steady flow of reports about Americans being held against their will in Southeast Asia since the flow of Vietnamese from Southeast Asia began. The U.S. government regularly, and with great care, had and will continue to check the validity of each of these reports. The United States can be expected to take appropriate action if any of these reports proves to be true. Top priority effort will continue to be assigned to investigate these efforts."

The families of servicemen missing in the Vietnam war have continued to believe that some of their husbands or sons are still alive and are being held captive in Southeast Asia. They have pressured the government repeatedly to try to locate the men and rescue them.

The National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Action in Southeast Asia has complained that the U.S. government has failed to press hard enough to find missing Americans.

By the Pentagon's count, there are 2,528 Americans unaccounted for in Southeast Asia, including 1,237 listed as missing in action. According to the Pentagon, 560 U.S. airmen went down in Laos, with 295 of them believed killed in crashes.

Of the other 265, 14 have been released alive as prisoners of war through Hanoi. Laos also has sent the United States the remains of two other American servicemen.

The mystery over what happened to the unaccounted-for Americans in Laos has lent credence to reports that some are still being held prisoners there. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer in February quoted Sayfa Phounsavan, a former Royal Lao air force pilot, as saying on the basis of refugee reports that, "There are today 40 or 50 Americans, most of them pilots, who were shot down over Laos during the war, being held prisoner there now."

Presumably on the basis of such reports, the U.S. intelligence community intensified its overhead spying on Laos. Sources said satellite photos showed shadows on the ground in the Laotian camp that some interpreters believed were too big for Asians.

Furthering this theory were pictures of tools which, to photo interpreters, looked too long for Asians but just right for Caucasians.

Also, the photos suggested that the word B52 had been spelled out with bodies or logs within the camp during one pass of a satellite or SR71 Blackbird spy plane. One theory was that this was a signal from desperate American POWs imprisoned as slave laborers in the jungle.

Other overhead pictures, sources said, showed what looked like a guard tower and earthen barriers to keep people in what appeared to be a prison compound.

However, this overhead evidence was not conclusive enough to justify a risky military action like the Iranian rescue attempt. Even if there were Caucasians in the compound, as the photos of shadows and tools indicated, they might be Soviet advisers there of

CONTINUED